THE INVISIBLE CUT

HOW EDITORS MAKE MOVIE MAGIC

BOBBIE O'STEEN

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INTRODUCTION:
THE SEDUCTIVE MAGICIAN

Movies take us on a journey that is incomparable. In a novel we travel through time and space, but we're always aware of the bound-up pages. While we're watching a movie, we let ourselves forget we're seeing pieces of film joined together — and that we're being completely manipulated. The director sets up the illusions, along with the screenwriter, cast and crew, but when the rabbit comes out of the hat, it's ultimately up to the editor to make us believe in movie magic. He's the seducer, not only anticipating our needs and feelings, but making us want things we're not even aware of. He's the deceiver who tricks us into believing we're experiencing real time instead of movie time and convinces us we're in a familiar three-dimensional space even though film is actually in two dimensions. Like the magician who uses the sweep of his cape to distract the audience from the set-up of a trick, the editor uses the movement on the screen as his sleight of hand, so the audience won't notice how mundane and problematic moviemaking really is.

The editor and director know they've pulled off the act when they're sitting in the middle of the theatre observing the body language of the audience all around them. They may barely lean forward or backward in their seats, widen their eyes or look away. They might gasp, scream, cough, clear their throats, laugh, be silent — or for a moment even stop breathing. The editor will notice how engrossed the audience is, but he'll be more consumed by the times when he feels he's lost them. When the audience is bored, annoyed or confused, the magic bubble will burst, and no one knows those moments better or feels more responsible than the editor.

There are some things that can't be learned. The editor has to be born with a strong sense of rhythm and an instinct for what looks good. He has to have a keen memory so that he can play back all the film he's seen in his head, then visualize the sequence of cuts he'll put together. He has to have a gut feeling for what works, be able to sense what's in the audience's hearts and minds. Only then will his cuts become those invisible transitions that grab them by the seat of their pants and keeps them there.

Digital technology has opened up mind-boggling possibilities for filmmakers and only time will tell how endless those are. Audiences have also

changed; they now have a shorter attention span and a greater ability to absorb information than ever. But they still have the same need: to be told a story in the most interesting and involving way. The editor has evolved, too, and is allowed and even expected to break rules more often. He still has to learn the basic concepts and techniques first, which he'll only really learn through trial and error. Then he'll have the confidence to take chances and try some pretty crazy things — it's amazing how many times they actually work! Editing is a quirky combination of truth, trickery and luck. When the editor reaps the best of all three, he can create magic.

CHAPTER 1

SETTING THE STAGE

There are two stages of filmmaking that predate the "first cut," that is, when the editor puts the movie into the first complete chronology of scenes before fine-tuning begins. They include the editor to various degrees.

PREPRODUCTION

When the director is rehearsing, doing script revisions, location scouting, casting — even making costume, set design and makeup decisions — the editor may be a part of it, or not. The role the editor plays varies tremendously at those stages when he's not considered essential. It depends on his interest in being involved, but more significantly on the egos and personalities of both the director and editor, and how that combination affects the depth of their relationship.

SHOOTING

There is an energy, sometimes even chaos on the set, which contrasts sharply with the controlled quiet of the cutting room. Some editors prefer to stay in their environment, in some cases just to keep their objectivity. There are also others who find that, by occasionally being on the set and observing the choices made, they have a better understanding of what the director wants. The confidence

of the director is a real factor here. Some, especially first-timers, feel they need the technical expertise of the editor along with the cinematographer. In that case the editor may suggest shots, but he has to be careful not to step on the cinematographer's toes.

Even with an experienced director, it's common for the editor to be called on the set when there's a sticky logistical problem. For instance, the filmmakers may be shooting a complex action or group scene and need to know if the shots are "blocked out" — camera and actors positioned — well enough to get the necessary "coverage" — camera setups and angles — for a scene. The editor, or his assistant, may also be called in for a matching issue. For instance, he may be asked to bring film clips to show what position an actor was in or what he was wearing. Also, if the production is short on time and money the director may ask the editor if certain coverage is really necessary.

Regardless, it's unusual for the editor to sit on the set all the time, if only because he needs to be cutting while they're shooting. The director will usually expect to see most of the movie in a first cut when they complete "principal photography," shooting that involves the entire cast and original crew. "Second unit photography" — shot by a secondary crew that doesn't require the director or principal actors — may occur before or after principal photography. If the movie is a huge production that has two or more units shooting and an enormous amount of film, the first cut may not be expected to be done by the time filming is completed. However, this is the exception rather than the rule. The director should see the film cut before he releases the crew and cast, so he'll know if he needs to re-shoot anything. In fact, that extra time is usually built into the initial schedule. Logistics and cast availability can become an expensive problem if the re-shoots have to be done much later.

The editor may not be in the same city if they're shooting on location, but for the most part he's traveling with the production company, unless the budget is very small. During the shoot the editor's assistants will prepare the "dailies," the film shot the previous day, screened after shooting for the director and, to varying degrees, the cast and crew. Traditionally, dailies were in a film format and projected nightly, but now — depending on the movie's budget and the ever-changing technology — they can also be shown on high-definition tape or in a digital format. In fact, the director and editor may sometimes just watch the previous day's footage alone on the computer.

There's a lot of variation on how much input the director has when the editor is putting the film together. But at the very least the director almost always gives his opinions during dailies. He may select certain shots, maybe a particular angle he wants to start the scene with, and most commonly he'll say

which "takes" — units of film shot from the same angle — he prefers, which usually mean which actor's performance. How much cut film the director sees during shooting varies, and it can have a lot to do with how many problems or concerns there are about the movie. The maximum input would be the director working with the editor on weekends and during downtime on the set and telling him where to cut. This is rare, and would mean the director has very little confidence in the editor, a very big ego, or both. If he knows a great deal about the mechanics of editing and he has specifically planned his shots to cut together a certain way, he may be more involved. But if the director values the editor's talent, usually he'll want to start out by seeing what he does with the material. The director will also be able to keep a certain degree of objectivity if he steps back and lets the editor wrestle with the film.

CHAPTER 2

PULLING OFF THE ACT

THE FIRST CUT

The logistics of making movies are overwhelming and, in fact, each stage of the process will leave behind problems. Whatever the case, only a percentage of the filmmakers' intentions end up in film, and miracles are not made in the cutting room. Even though an editor can make the most out of a bad script or terrible dailies, he cannot make a good movie out of such material. The editor has to bear the repercussions of this cold reality when he puts it all together. That's the negative part. But this is also the time of greatest potential for the editor, because he will be at his freshest and most open-minded in his approach to the film. Still, it's a scary first step, when the editor plunges in and finds out what he's really got to work with. Before the editor even touches the film, he has to prepare himself. He should have read the script many times and become as familiar as he can with what the director and writer has envisioned, part of which he may learn if he sits in on rehearsals. Once he's internalized the material he must think about each scene and its context in the whole movie. He should see that script as the blueprint and editing as the final step of movie; he is, after all, the last storyteller in the filmmaking process. When he has the reality of the filmed scene sitting in front of him, he should ask himself such questions as:

> What is the scene about? What is its overall function? That is, where is this scene in the trajectory of the story and in the development of the characters?
> Is the audience supposed to identify with a particular character — or are we supposed to hate that character? Should that character be dominant or play a secondary role? Should the emphasis or sympathy shift to another character during the course of the scene?
> Are there details that need to be emphasized to reveal character or plot?
> Is there a surprise or shock that has to be set up?
> What are the dramatic arcs or climaxes in the scene, and if there are more than one, which is the most powerful?
> How well does that scene play within the context of the whole movie?

Each editor has a different way of looking at the raw footage. Some editors say they initially watch it as if they were the audience, and some editors immediately start cutting in their heads when they watch the dailies. Regardless, the editor should run the film as many times as he needs to absorb it, logging notes on what he and the director like best in terms of angles and takes, but also special moments, special lines, etc.

Then comes the physical part. He's sitting at the computer, he's absorbed the film and the comments about it, and now he realizes he is about to face constant decisions. He's got three decisions to make right off the bat: what shot to use — which take and angle — where to start the shot and where to end it. It seems so simple until he realizes how virtually unlimited his choices are. The good news is that the first cut already reduces his choices dramatically, but the decisions may still feel overwhelming.

The key advice here is that the editor should relax and let the material lead him. He has to trust his instincts and try to see the overall pattern. Just as an artist does when he makes sculpture out of a piece of clay, he has to first create a basic shape and worry about polishing it later. He should not be overwhelmed by the whole movie, but just take it scene by scene. He shouldn't count frames, or inch backwards and forwards over the cuts. This is not math or mechanics. He should just let the cuts be and not get tripped up by subtleties or details, such as an action that doesn't match up perfectly from shot to shot or a line that can't be heard clearly. If he over analyzes, second-guesses, and works it to death, he steps into the quicksand of being lost and confused at a very crucial stage.

If the editor finds himself stuck, struggling with a scene and unable to fix it, he should put that scene aside and let it "heal." because if he picks at that

"sore" it never will. This is also true if he runs a scene and hates what he did. Even if he lets only a few days pass, he'll be amazed at how much more objective he'll be about what needs to be done to fix the problem. He may also develop insights into how to fix a scene after he's seen how it blends in with the rest of the film, or at least with the scenes that precede and follow it. Showing it to others, especially assistants or apprentices, can also be helpful, although too many opinions at this stage can be dangerous. The editor should trust that once the film takes shape, the dust will settle and it'll become more obvious where the pacing is too slow, what should be eliminated or moved around, and what the problems and mistakes are.

There are also no hard-and-fast rules that dictate how the editor should approach the material. It depends on the editor, the input he gets from the director and the needs of the particular scene. An editor might use the best "master shot" — the all-inclusive shot that establishes characters and their setting — first and then run different angles after that, trading them into the shot where necessary. Some editors may choose a starting point, maybe even a close-up, and build from there. No matter what, the editor should try to put in everything the director shot from the script, unless it's really horrible! This doesn't mean he must use every single angle, since that would bog the movie down. But since this is a first go-through, the movie will be longer than it should eventually be. The basic rule of thumb is that the first cut is 10 to 15% longer than the final cut. As the cutting progresses, the film will take on a life of its own, because every movie has its own natural rhythm. This is based on the type of story being told, the actors' performances, and the director's style. The editor should be in tune with that style, as if he is directing the film for the second time. In fact, the roles of editor and director will start to merge after the first cut.

THE EDITOR AND DIRECTOR GO TO WORK

After the first cut, the director may move right into the cutting room or, more likely, take a short vacation. If the director has not seen the entire movie before they "wrap" — finish shooting — he will at least have seen most of the edited film, and certainly any problematic material that may need to be re-shot. After the director's hiatus, he and the film editor often screen the movie in a small theatre to assimilate the real viewing experience, rather than watch it on a computer. When the editor and director see this initial assemblage of the movie, it's their golden moment of objectivity. It's the closest they will both ever be to the heart, mind, and body of the audience. Once they start picking at it, they'll both lose that precious distance. Although the director is usually nervous about seeing the first cut, at least he's not yet susceptible to outside pressure and too

many opinions. The downside is that the editor has to help the director deal with the fact that only a part of his expectations are captured on film. The director may even have such strong ideas about what he wanted to show that he may think he shot something even when he hadn't!

In those months when the director and editor are fine-tuning the movie they will pay a lot of attention to details, but they should always remember their first impressions of the overall movie and their initial concerns, such as: do we like the main character enough, which characters need to be more developed, what part of the story is confusing, and are we saying what we want to say? As the director and editor continue to discuss the movie, the editor will become more in tune with the director's intentions, and he should honor them but also try to surprise the director by going beyond those expectations — and sometimes even play devil's advocate and reverse them. There will be a back and forth of the director and editor working together and the editor working alone. They may run a scene and discuss it at length, and he may do some cutting while the director is present. He will often want to be alone to struggle with the film after getting the director's input, especially if it is problematic. The editor then can totally concentrate, while giving the director some distance before he returns to look at it again. During this process they may juggle a scene or "sequence" — a series of scenes connected by story, time or place — around, "lift" scenes — remove from the edited movie — alter their length and change takes and angles. They may also undo many of those changes, and then make them again!

This is the time when the editor's patience, flexibility and vital sense of humor will be tested. If the director asks him to do something he's strongly opposed to, he can voice his objections but he should still try it. No matter what, the editor should not fall into the trap of thinking he's right just because he has more technical knowledge or is more familiar with all the film. Being a collaborator is an essential part of the editor's role. Besides, he'll never know for sure that something doesn't work until he tries it.

CHAPTER 3

RULES OF WISDOM

Here are pearls of advice, to help keep you, the editor, on track right from the start:

Concentration is the name of the game.
You have to be totally immersed when you cut, so being organized is a necessary first step to keep your head clear.

Tell the story and get the good stuff.
This may seem obvious, but if you keep that line in the back of your mind like a mantra it will help you stay on course. It has been said that "A good editor is someone who can tell a joke, because the timing is right and he tells just enough."

Every story has a beginning, middle and end. Know what's expected from each of them.
Beginning: You've got about ten minutes before the audience judges you so open with impact.
Middle: You've got to keep the audience caring and while you do that keep it moving.
End: If the audience doesn't like it, no matter how much they like the movie up until then, you're dead. You can't be too predictable, but it has to be believable and emotionally satisfying.

Movie first, scene second, moment third.
That should be the order of importance whenever a cut is made. Everything has to be justified in terms of how it serves the movie. You can't hold onto a scene or moment just because you or the director falls in love with a show-off piece or something that has personal value. Hopefully the editor will be less susceptible to such ego-driven choices.

Don't cut as long as it's working.
Appreciate the values on screen, trust the moment.

Always cut for a reason.
Cut for new information or an emotional need. Editors have a tendency to over-cut, often to get noticed.

The moment you peak —cut!
Don't be on the nose, be barely ahead of them — always leave them wanting more.

Never cut for a line, only for a reaction.
If the audience knows what the character is saying and there's no other information they're going to get from that character, it's not interesting to see him. Cut to someone else instead.

What moves and makes noise attracts attention.
Keep this in mind whenever you need to use sleight of hand to distract the audience.

Avoid boring the audience.
It's the editor's worst sin. Not only will their minds wander but so will their eyes. As a result, they'll notice more mistakes and problems. To avoid dead time there's a general rule that entrances and exits, and anything or anyone arriving and leaving, should be kept to a minimum.

Avoid repetition.
Not only with storytelling, but with visuals. And if you have to cut back to the same shot again, for some reason, make it shorter every time.

Avoid confusion.
This is especially true about the audience's sense of placement. Try to establish the geography of the actors or objects ASAP and then if new actors enter, reestablish them in relation to the other actors.

Look at the movie as a series of arcs.
In scenes and the movie in general, you start at one level, build to a climax, then you have to come down and start all over again, because there's nowhere else to go. If you stay at one level, the movie won't sustain interest, even if it's all noise and drama. What makes a movie interesting is how you structure those highs and lows.

Trust the quiet moments.
Silence and stillness are usually more powerful than their opposites. Editing is often about pausing, watching and waiting. In fact, it's much more challenging to make a long dialog scene suspenseful than a car chase.

Cut in motion, whenever possible.
Individual shots and entire scenes should, if possible, begin and end with continuous motion, because those transitions makes the cuts appear seamless and keep the momentum going.

Cut longer rather than shorter.
It's easier to trim down than add on.

Keep tracking the emotional impact.
Cut for the eyes or for any other subtlety that reveals the heart. The slightest change in expression can show the deepest feeling.

Figure out how to correct what's wrong without hurting what's good.
A change always has a certain domino effect on the value and impact of the film around it.

Don't presume anything until it's all put together.
A scene that may have been powerfully effective on its own can fail to work with what comes before or after it. A more subtle version — or no scene at all — may make the movie play better.

Never say never and never give up.
You should try everything, even if you make cuts that, logically, should absolutely not work or fix a problem. There are so many happy accidents and welcome surprises. Besides, you can always undo what you try.

Surprise them.
Keeping the audience on edge and off center sustains interest.

Rules are meant to be broken.
Knowledge and experience will only help you know how far to push the limits and give you the nerve to follow through on whatever ballsy choice you make. After all, Picasso had the skill and training to realistically depict the human body before he had the guts to paint it all cockeyed!

If you want to shake up the audience, do that for a reason, too.
A cut that's meant to be obvious and have visual punch should still serve a purpose.

Editing is about thinking, not cutting.
Don't jump the gun; sit back and ponder your choices before you act.

The best cut is the one you never see.
The invisible one that pulls the audience along without their knowing it.

The art of editing is the art of trickery.
Don't remind the audience of the moviemaking process. Make them believe in the magic.

CHAPTER 8

KNOWING THE CAMERA

COVERING THE SCENE

The editor has to rely on the director and cinematographer to shoot the right coverage for a scene — all the necessary camera setups and angles — but it's then up to the editor to create an involving, understandable narrative with the footage he's given. Traditionally, a scene may start with an all-inclusive master shot, but the filmmakers may also want to start on a detail or close-up. Usually, as the scene builds, it will be broken up into closer angles, but there are no hard-and-fast rules. Whatever the choices are, the editor has to understand the impact of those different angles, as well as camera moves and lenses, so he can use the shots in the most effective way.

The editor also has to adjust to whatever approach the director uses to cover a scene. An extremely limited choice would involve the director using a locked-down camera where the whole scene is played out in one shot or, to a lesser extent, he may decide to play the scenes out in long, elaborate shots and avoid cutting whenever possible. This may be especially true in a crucial dialog scene. The director may also use the reverse approach and shoot a lot of short, varied angles, especially if he wants to create a dizzyingly exciting action scene.

In terms of planning, he may "camera cut," that is, pre-conceive the exact choice and sequence of shots. This may be the case if the scene is logistically

very complicated and needs to be "storyboarded," that is, shots are sketched in continuity, as a blueprint for coverage. A director might also lean towards the camera-cutting approach if he has an especially good grasp on the mechanics of camera coverage and editing — and/or has severe time and budget constraints. But if a director actually chooses to preplan every single shot — giving the editor virtually no options or leftover film and himself no opportunity to second guess in the cutting room — he's being pretty foolhardy. Unless he's Alfred Hitchcock. More on that later!

KNOWING "THE LINE"

One of the editor's key responsibilities is to keep the audience from getting confused, and that means making sure they always know where the actors are in relation to one another. He has to make sure that the film he cuts together honors what is called the "stage line." This is an imaginary line that cuts through the middle of a shot, and the camera must stay on one side of that line, within that 180° space. If the camera crosses it, the viewpoint will be reversed and the audience will become disoriented. For instance, if a boy and girl are seated across from each other, the stage line cuts through the middle of the table and both of the actors. If the camera mistakenly crosses the line from one shot to the next, the boy and girl will be looking in the same direction and not at each other. In **Figure 1**, if camera angles 1 and 2 or 3 and 4 are cut together, the boy and girl will be looking at each other. But the boy and girl will both be facing right if the editor cuts from angles 1 and 4, and facing left from angles 2 to 3. This is a classic example of the fact that what happens in reality — how the actors are actually positioned — has no bearing on *screen* reality, which is what the editor creates.

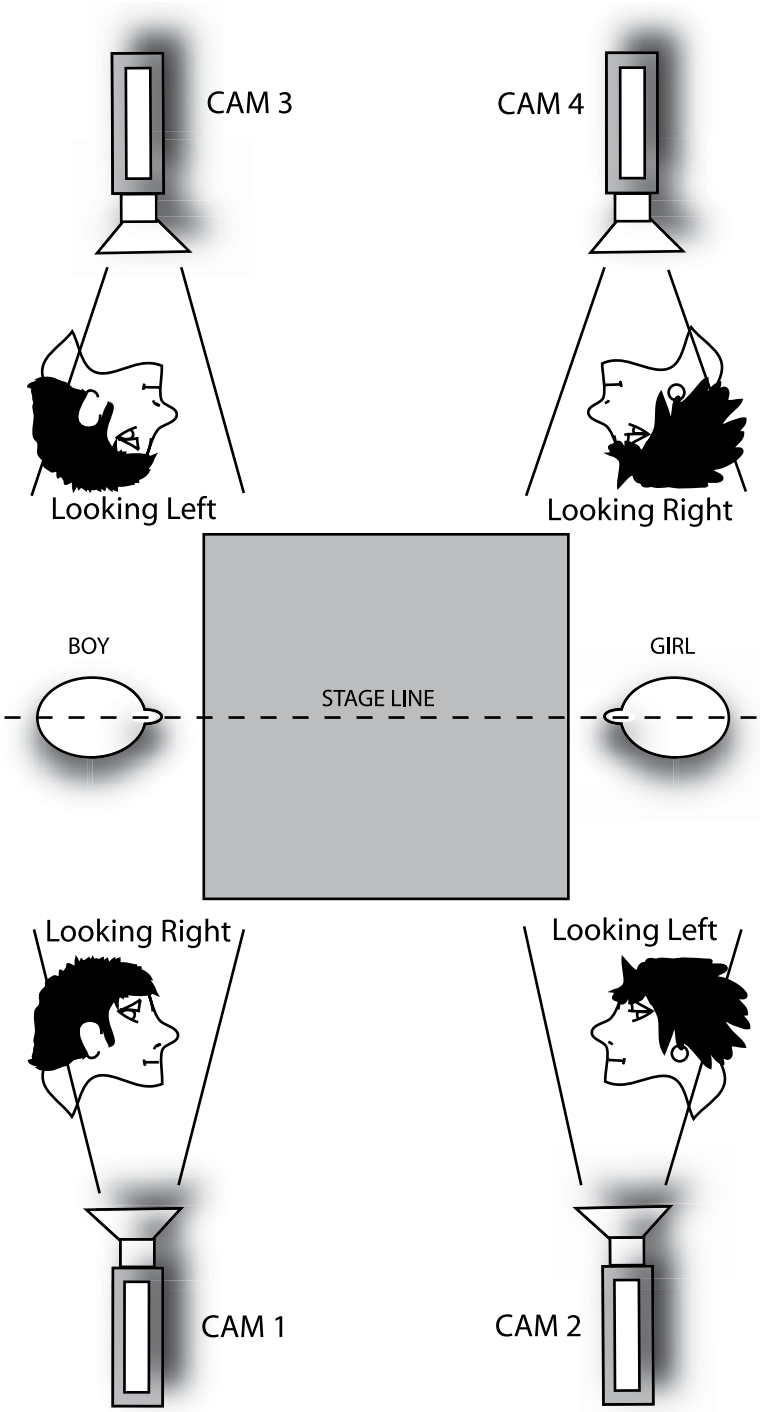
CAM 3
CAM 4
Looking Left
Looking Right
BOY
GIRL
STAGE LINE
Looking Right
Looking Left
CAM 1
CAM 2

FIGURE 1

Inevitably, it can get much more complicated than that. For instance, if there are three people sitting around a table, three stage lines will run through each pair of actors. If the only footage the editor has is single shots of each of the actors, which is the case in **Figure 2**, he will never have them all looking in the direction they're supposed to. Two of the three pairs of actors would be facing the correct way — that is, two of three lines would not be crossed — if the editor cuts from cameras 1 to 2 or 2 to 3. All the other angle combinations cross more lines, so that only one pair of actors is looking in the correct direction.

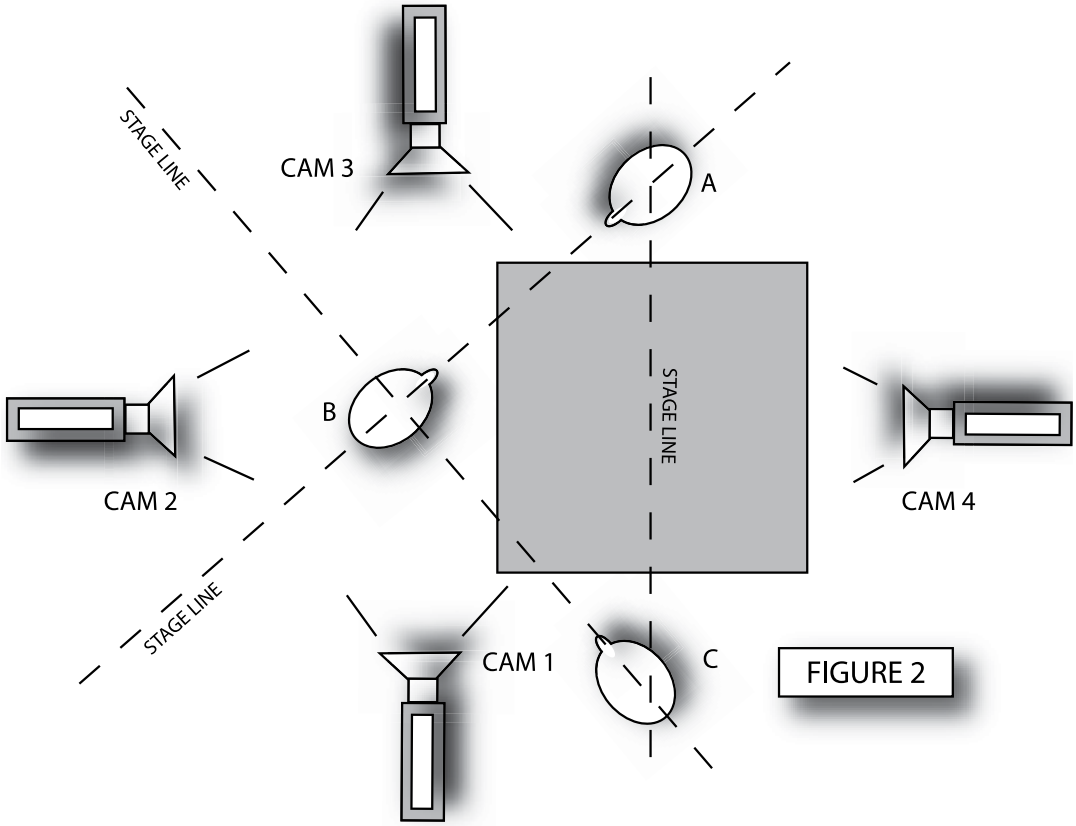

FIGURE 2

Hopefully the editor would not get stuck with angles he can't use, but he has to recognize these kinds of mistakes that will disorient his audience. In reality, a smart director will not corner himself so that he's dodging every line. He would do this by moving actors or the camera across the line to establish a new one, which can also be used to shift the mood or create dramatic emphasis. Close-ups are useful bridges to a new stage line since they often don't have a specific geography of their own. The director can also group actors in various ways to minimize line-crossings and bounce-around editing.

The movie *Twelve Angry Men* involves, for the most part, twelve jurors sitting around a table and is a classic example of how the filmmakers brilliantly maneuvered their way around crossing-the-line traps. Examples will be shown below with diagrams and frame grabs from two scenes, and will be referred to again during the deconstruction of this movie in Chapter 13.

The way the editor takes on the dreaded group scene is to initially establish where all the jurors are seated. He does this by cutting to shots which angle down at the jurors from all four corners of the table. After the first high shot (shown in *frame grab #1-3*), the editor cuts to another shot (seen in *frame grab #1-4*) that crosses the line completely and reverses everyone's direction, so the audience sees two clearly opposing angles. The same is true of another pair of shots (*frame grabs #1-8* and *#1-9*) which then completes the coverage of all four corners of the table, which is illustrated in **Diagram 1**.

frame grab 1-3

frame grab 1-4

frame grab 1-8

frame grab 1-8

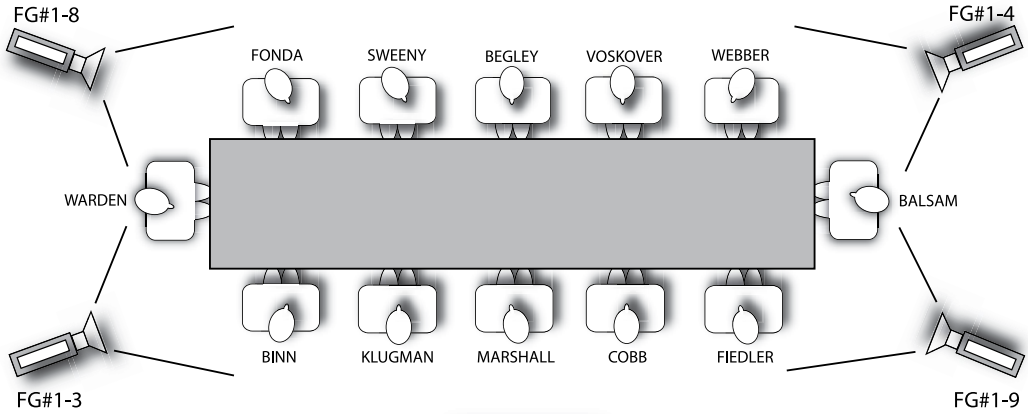

DIAGRAM 1

In the next two shots, the actors are grouped a certain way so that when the editor cuts from one group (*frame grab #1-10*) to the next (*frame grab #1-11*), only

frame grab 1-10

frame grab 1-11

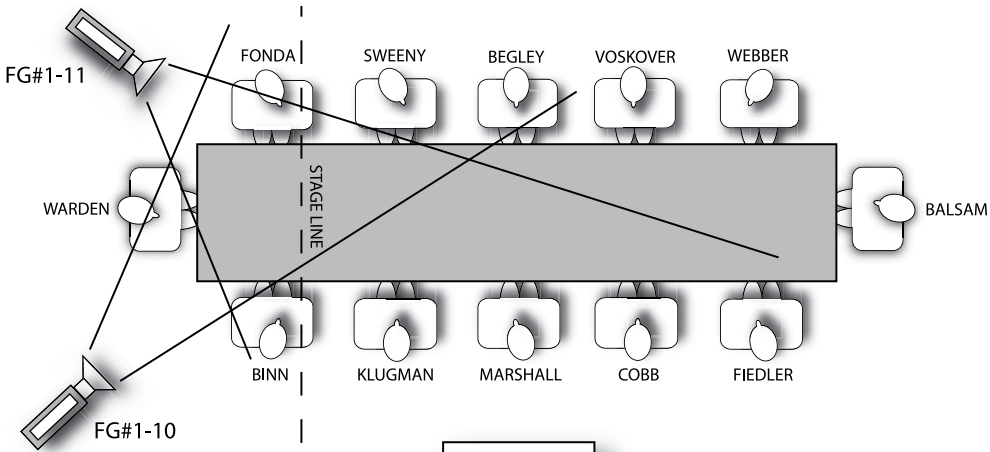

DIAGRAM 2

actors Fonda and Binn appear both times. Thus he only has to honor one stage line, as shown in **Diagram 2**.

frame grab 1-14

frame grab 1-15

frame grab 1-16

Frame grab #1-14 is the same angle as *frame grab #1-10* but now the interaction shifts between two other actors, Fonda and Warden, and a new stage line is established, as seen in **Diagram 3**. When the editor cuts to the next two shots (shown in *frame grabs #1-15* and *#1-16*), only those two actors appear and they continue to stay on the left and right sides of the screen respectively. If the camera had crossed that line from *frame grab #14* to *frame grab #15*, the actors' positions would be flipped and the audience would have been confused.

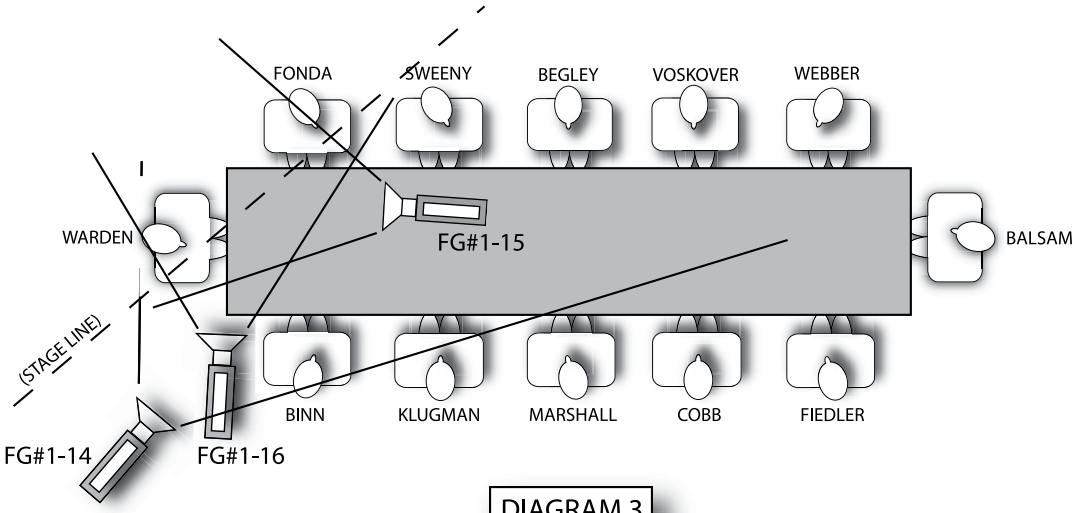

DIAGRAM 3

The editor can also use sleight of hand to violate a stage line rule when he knows the audience is looking elsewhere. When the editor cuts from one group of jurors (*frame grab #2-5*) to a "reverse angle," the opposite perspective of a shot already taken (shown in *frame grab #2-6*), there are six actors that are seen in both shots. The dramatic focus is between actors Balsam and Fonda and they remain in left-right positions from one shot to the next, honoring Stage Line A, as seen in **Diagram 4**. The positions of the jurors sitting between them are flipped from one shot to the next — their Stage Line B is crossed — but the editor assumes the audience won't notice since they're not focused on them.